

# *Family Health History Toolkit*

Produced by the  
Utah Department of Health

*Make Family Health History a Tradition*

[www.health.utah.gov/genomics](http://www.health.utah.gov/genomics)



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Project partners:

Utah Department of Health

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Intermountain Health Care, Clinical Genetics Institute

Salt Lake County Aging Services, Healthy Aging Program

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Utah Genealogical Association

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Utah's Local Health Departments

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# *Make Family Health History a Tradition*



For many of us, Thanksgiving Day is filled with memories of spending time with family and enjoying a dinner complete with buttery rolls, a golden-brown turkey, and let's not forget the pumpkin pies. It's the time of year when we think about the things we are grateful for. But did you know that learning about your family health history could be the most important tradition you make this Thanksgiving?

The Family Health History Toolkit will help you talk about your family health history, write down what you learn, and then share it with your doctor and family members. Take it to your Thanksgiving dinner or next family get-together and make family health history a tradition!

“Knowing your family history can save your life.

The earlier you know which health conditions run in your family, the easier it is to develop prevention plans with your doctor. Start the conversation with your family on National Family History Day – celebrated every Thanksgiving.”

– Dr. Richard H. Carmona, MD, MPH,  
U.S. Surgeon General

## **Talk about it**

The holidays are a perfect time to talk about your family health history. Not only can it be fun, but it could save your life. Use the **10 Questions to Ask Your Family at Thanksgiving** on page 6 or the **“Turkey Talk” Health Discussion** fact sheet to help you talk with your family members about your family health history. Or you can try the one-on-one approach on page 2. Then use the Health Family Tree to write down what you have learned. You can also use the **How to Talk with Your Family** fact sheet for other fun ideas to get your family talking.

Fun tip: Instead of a tablecloth, use sheets of butcher paper to cover the table and put crayons out for everyone to color with. Write down what your family knows about their family health history. Then go around the table and share what each of you wrote down.

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## One-on-one approach

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If some of your family members don't want to talk about your family health history, try talking one-on-one with those who have a chronic health problem. You may already know which family members have a health problem or you may need to ask others to help you find them. Talk with these family members and help them make the link between their health and the rest of your family's health, including younger family members who may not have developed the problem yet. Talk with them as you finish peeling the potatoes, setting the table, or eating pumpkin pie – anytime that will get you talking about your family health history.

Below are some talking points to help you talk with your family members:

- I know that you have (for example, diabetes). I recently learned that diabetes can run in families and that having a family history of diabetes can increase our family members' risk of getting it too. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about diabetes?
- When did your diabetes start? What choices have you made to stay healthy?
- We need to know about the health of our family members. By knowing this we can make choices to lower our risk of getting these problems. Do you know if other family members had or have a chronic health problem?
- Don't wait to make healthy choices. With or without a family history of a health problem, we have the power to keep ourselves and loved ones healthy. By exercising, not smoking, and eating a healthy diet we can keep ourselves healthy. Screening tests can also detect risk factors, like high cholesterol or high blood pressure, which can be treated early to lower the chances of getting a chronic health problem.

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Fun tips: To help make Thanksgiving more healthy, go on a walk or play a game of flag football before you eat – just get moving.

Or have a contest with your family to see who can turn your family's secret pie recipe or other favorite dish into a more healthy treat by substituting healthy ingredients in place of high-fat and high-calorie ones.

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## Write it down

Don't forget all the great stories and health information your family talked about – write it down! We've made it easy for you – just complete your own Health Family Tree. The instructions are boxed below.

Each box on the Health Family Tree should be used for one family member. Start with the box labeled “You” and fill out your health history. Then fill out a box for your brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Try to fill out each box as much as you can. If you don't know if a family member had the health problem, mark “Not Sure”. Write down the age when the problem started, even a guess is better than leaving it blank. If you find health problems that run in your family are not listed, write them down anyway.

# 1

## YOU

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

Year of birth \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Male  
☐ Female

Has he/she ever been told BY A DOCTOR that he/she suffers from any of the following health problems?

YES	NO	NOT SURE	AGE AT FIRST DIAGNOSIS	Condition
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Heart Attack (hospitalized)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Coronary bypass surgery
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Rheumatic or other heart disease
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Stroke
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Breast cancer
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Colon cancer
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Hip fracture
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Asthma
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Alzheimer's disease
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	High blood pressure (on medication)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	High blood cholesterol
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	Diabetes

**CIGARETTE SMOKING**

☐ Smoker: Has smoked cigarettes regularly for at least 1 year  
☐ Ex-smoker: Stopped for at least 1 year after smoking regularly  
☐ Non-smoker: Never smoked cigarettes regularly  
☐ Not Sure

IF SMOKER OR EX-SMOKER mark average amount smoked

☐ Less than 1 pack a day  
☐ About 1 pack a day  
☐ More than 1 pack a day

**USUAL WEIGHT**

☐ Slender or average  
☐ 50-99 lbs. overweight  
☐ 10-49 lbs. overweight  
☐ Over 100 lbs. overweight  
☐ Not Sure

**ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES** (beer, wine, liquor)?

☐ Regularly  
☐ Never  
☐ Sometimes  
☐ Former  
☐ Not Sure

**Vigorous ROUTINE EXERCISE** at least 3 times per week?

☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Not Sure





These other websites can also help you complete a family health history.

- U.S. Surgeon General Family History Initiative  
[www.hhs.gov/familyhistory](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Family History website  
[www.cdc.gov/genomics/public/famhistMain.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/genomics/public/famhistMain.htm)
- National Society of Genetic Counselors  
[www.nsgc.org](http://www.nsgc.org)

Mark your calendar! In 2006, you can update your Health Family Tree online at [www.health.utah.gov/genomics](http://www.health.utah.gov/genomics).

Fun Tip: Make a copy of the Health Family Tree box on page 3 for each family member. Then, cut the boxes out and use them as place cards. Have everyone fill out their box and talk about what they wrote.

### Share it with your doctor

Now that you've talked with your family and written down your family health history, it's time to share what you learned with your doctor and other family members. Use the questions boxed below as a guide for sharing your family health history with your doctor.

- Based on my family history of (for example, diabetes), am I at risk for diabetes?
- Would making lifestyle changes like eating a healthy diet, exercising, or not smoking lower my risk?
- Are there screening tests I can take to detect the health problem in my family (for example, diabetes) early?
- Do I need to talk with a genetic counselor or other specialist about my risk or my family members' risk?



## Share it with your family members

Sign and make copies of the note below, and attach it to the **Questions and Answers** fact sheet. Then give it to your family members. This note will remind them why a family health history is important. You can also use this example to write your own note.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

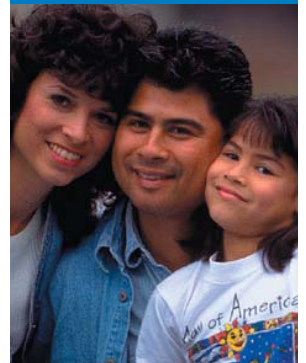
You are an important part of my family and I care about your health. I learned that health problems that tend to run in our family can increase your chance of getting the same problem, and I wanted to share this with you.

People may know they have family members with health problems like cancer, diabetes or heart disease, but may not know that a family history of these puts them at risk too.

Knowing your family health history can help you do things to protect yourself and loved ones.

Please read the attached fact sheet. If a health problem runs in our family, talk to your doctor about ways to keep yourself and other family members healthy, so we can all attend many more holidays together.

Love, \_\_\_\_\_



## Let us know how it went

Did your family members enjoy your new tradition? Did they learn something new? Did they have questions? Was this toolkit helpful to you? We would love to hear your stories.

Send an email to [genomics@utah.gov](mailto:genomics@utah.gov) or write us a letter and send it to: Utah Department of Health Genomics Program PO Box 142106 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-2106. We want to make this toolkit useful for families, so your comments will be greatly appreciated.



# *Make Family Health History a Tradition*

## *10 Questions to Ask Your Family at Thanksgiving*



1. What traits seem to run in our family? (You don't have to only ask about health, start with anything from your family's blue eyes or curly hair to your height and personality – just get your family talking.)
2. Did any of my family members have a health problem? (Examples: Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, asthma, birth defects, cancer, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, and stroke)
3. Were there any miscarriages or stillbirths? Were any babies born with birth defects?
4. How old were my family members when their health problem started or was diagnosed?
5. How old were my family members when they died? (If you don't know exact dates, ask about the approximate age at death.)
6. What were the reasons they died? (Note if the cause of death was unknown.)
7. Where were my family members born? What is our ethnic background? (Ethnicity can be a risk factor for some health problems.)
8. Did any of my relatives smoke? How much and for how long?
9. What other lifestyle habits did my family members have? (Examples: Did they exercise regularly? Were any overweight or extremely thin? What sort of food did they eat? Did any have addictive behaviors, such as drinking excessively?)
10. What types of allergies, whether hay fever, reactions to food, or medications, did family members have?

### References:

- Daus, Carol. *Past Imperfect: How tracing your family medical history can save your life.* California: Santa Monica Press, 1999.
- MayoClinic.com *How to compile your family medical history*

Contact the Utah Department of Health Chronic Disease Genomics Program for more information, (801) 538-9416 or visit our website below.